



Disaster Response—Priorities and Resources for Communities

“Communities need to identify priorities for emergency response before a disaster occurs.”

Communities can either come together or unravel after a disaster. The difference is often the degree of focus, coordination and communication among residents and leaders.

It helps if communities identify priorities for emergency response before a disaster occurs. Local government should be familiar with emergency resources within the community and what is available on local, state and national levels.

Concerns Following Impact

Usually the most critical concerns following disaster impact include:

- Rescue of injured or endangered residents, removal of victims, evacuation
- Downed electric wires, power outages
- Leaking gas mains, ruptured chemical containers
- Containing and extinguishing fires
- Prevention of looting

Response Resources

Beyond local government and emergency services such as police and fire departments, communities can look for assistance from the following resources:

- Local emergency government. Your county may have an emergency government office and director. While larger cities may have local directors, smaller communities often have a critical need for the leadership and direction county emergency government can offer.
- The American Red Cross. Providing food and shelter to disaster survivors is a major thrust of Red Cross assistance, but assistance can also extend to back-up medical services, especially in smaller communities.

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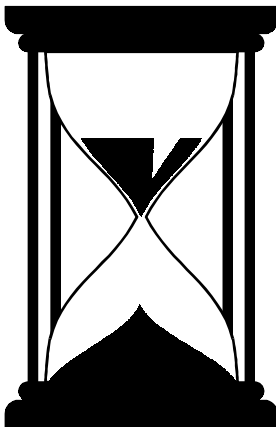
Adapted by UF/IFAS from:
Disaster Handbook for Extension Agents
(Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service)

- The state highway department may be called in for rerouting of traffic and related concerns.
- The National Guard may be called in to prevent looting, help with sandbagging in a flood, or any number of other measures involving manpower.

Declarations from the President

Once a preliminary damage assessment has been completed by emergency response personnel, the state governor can request a major disaster or emergency declaration from the President of the United States:

- Declaration of an Emergency—The president can issue this declaration to supplement state and local efforts to save lives and protect property. Total assistance provided may not exceed \$5 million.
- Declaration of a Major Disaster—After a natural catastrophe, assistance is offered to both public and private sectors through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Nearly 100 different programs and services help provide relief.



Other Response Concerns

Once rescue concerns and other immediate dangers are taken care of, another level of activity needs to take place. Sometimes these concerns must be addressed upon impact.

- Is the water safe to drink? Testing for safe water should begin and continue throughout disaster recovery because of the chance of contamination from many different sources.
- Sewers. Chemical spillage needs immediate attention to prevent problems at sewage treatment plants. In some cases, plants may be overloaded because of floodwaters.
- Structural safety. Are buildings and homes safe to enter? Professional building inspection is critical.
- Hazardous materials. All hazardous materials stored at commercial and other properties should be accounted for, from industrial chemicals to those used at dry cleaning stores and gas stations. Spills can be a problem, and pressurized tanks could burst. Fire departments are required to keep an inventory of hazardous material locations.
- Damaged trees, debris. Debris is a major cause of injury during clean-up. Machinery should be brought in to help clear and dispose of wreckage. Some communities have brought in metal

removers after a tornado to adequately clear farm fields for safe tractor use.

Additional resources

- Your local emergency government office
- Your local Extension Agents
- The American Red Cross
- The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)